

“Spiritual...and perhaps a wee bit religious...”:  
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)  
on August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010 (13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost)  
by Foster Freed

Luke 13: 10-17

I want to begin, this morning...I want to begin, by sharing two brief thoughts that I hope you'll tuck away for a few minutes...thoughts I'll return to once we have taken a closer look at this morning's text.

The first of those thoughts has to do with the refrain I allude to in this morning's sermon title. So often nowadays...so very often...people will respond to questions about their religious life by uttering the stock phrase: “I consider myself spiritual, but not religious.” By which they tend to mean that they have a handful of spiritually grounded beliefs, perhaps a handful of spiritually motivated practices (pursued, quite possibly, with a rigour that would put many of us to shame!), but that they are leery—for all kinds of understandable reasons—they are leery of becoming too closely connected with institutionalized spirituality....

...institutionalized spirituality, another name for which tends to be “religion”. That's the first thought I'd like you to tuck away for future reference. The other is simply this.

Later this morning, as our service reaches its climax, you will hear Hilde and I speak of a time when *Jesus took some bread, broke it, and gave it to [his disciples, saying:] “Take and eat!,”* A moment later, you will then hear us describe how Jesus subsequently *took a cup of wine and said, “This is my very life-blood, poured out for all.”* For present purposes, what I want you to recall is that the church, traditionally, has referred to those words as the “words of institution”...“words of institution”...words, in short, through which Jesus is said to have “instituted” the sacrament of the Holy Supper as a central facet (some would say *the* central facet) of the *institutionalized* spirituality (in other words, the *religion*) we call Christianity. That's the other thought...that's the other thought I'd like you to tuck away for future reference.

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According to the Gospel of St. Luke...the only one of the Gospels to record this episode...according to Luke, Jesus was one day teaching in a synagogue, in a village Luke doesn't bother to identify. While preaching a woman enters the synagogue. She is bent over...apparently has been bent over for eighteen long years. And there's nothing fantastical about such a condition; just the other day I was parked outside of the Parksville Community Centre waiting to chauffeur a couple of daughters back to the house. Sure enough, a young woman was accompanying an older woman—possibly her mom, possibly a resident at Stanford Place—an older woman whose body formed a perfect right-angle, a perfect 90 degree angle as the two of them gingerly walked

together. She could well have been the woman in this morning's story; the reality of such a condition is with us even now, some 2000 years later. But I digress.

I digress. Because the long and the short of our story, is that Jesus takes a break from his teaching to heal the woman; a miracle that produces no shortage of wonder on the part of those who observe it, but also a miracle that produces objections from at least one of the onlookers, namely the President of the synagogue. In defence of the Sabbath, he complains that "there are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day."

It's worth noting—at the outset—it's worth noting that a number of Jewish scholars insist that the President of the Synagogue was simply wrong; he was likely having a bad hair day, leading him to misappropriate the ban on work that is part of traditional Sabbath observance. In other words, it may well have been his ego—rather than the Sabbath—that was being defiled on this particular occasion, much as Hilde and my egos might be subtly (or not so subtly threatened) if there were a line-up during Sunday services to visit Bruce McIntyre down in the healing room. We too might be tempted to say: "Hey, there are six days of the week in which Bruce does healing-touch; come back on one of those days! Today you have to just sit there, keep quiet, and listen to the sermon!!"

You know...when confronted with a story such as this one...a story in which Jesus encounters opposition from the religious leaders of his day...my hunch is that there are really only two interpretive paths open to us. We can approach such a story (as such stories have often be approached) with the tacit assumption that Jewish religion—in other words the synagogue—is an inherently corrupt institution, meaning that we—who represent the Christian religion—in other words the church—can puff out our chests and give ourselves a gentle pat on the back. "Thank goodness God did not make us like those folks; thank goodness I'm an enlightened religious leader, not like the President of that synagogue!" That's one way to approach a story such as this one. The other way involves the risky acknowledgment that our religious institution and our religious leadership is vulnerable to a similar ossification—a similar inflexibility—to the one that appears to have inflicted the President of that particular synagogue on that particular Sabbath morning.

And if we take the latter approach as our own...if we take an honest look at our *own* practices, at our *own* habitual ways of going about the work of being the church...we will find ourselves taking in a highly personal way, the fact that our Lord came into this world not only uttering words of institution...

...words that helped to establish a religious institution that in a few short decades will celebrate its **2000<sup>th</sup>** anniversary

...but that his presence was experienced, by at least some of his contemporaries, as a profoundly subversive presence: one that shook the very foundations of the institutional religion of his day. And if you think those two facts about

Jesus—the fact that he managed both to challenge the institution *and* to begin a new one!—if you think those two facts about Jesus are easily reconciled, you had best think again.

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I suppose—I suppose—that what I am trying to suggest this morning...at any rate *one* of the things I am trying to suggest, is that a key reason—a key factor—that makes it possible for so many North Americans to say that they tend to be “spiritual but not religious” is that they have been shaped by a culture that has been shaped (for the better part of 2000 years) by the paradoxical influence of the Gospel. For better or for worse, the institutes of the Christian religion are grounded upon the life and teachings of someone who embodied within his own being a stance that combined fierce loyalty to God and fierce devotion to the well-being of God’s sons and daughters, with a refusal to accommodate institutional arrangements that marginalized either God or God’s hurting sons and daughters. And so, you see, in the very process of refusing to abide by the institutional norms of *his* day, when those norms appeared to place a barrier between God’s healing love and God’s broken people...

...in the very process of wearing (at least some of the time) the mantle of a rebel, Jesus contributed and continues to contribute to a culture in which it is quite easy to bypass the institution—to bypass religion—on the road to the things of the Spirit. And who among us...who among us...will be so hypocritical as to pretend that we, ourselves, have never been tempted to take just such a path as we seek our own spiritual well-being, let the institution be damned?

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I want to try a thought experiment with you. I want to ask a question.

What if...what if...the words of institution Jesus spoke on the night he was betrayed...words of blessing over bread broken...words of generous self-offering over a cup filled to the brim...what if those words had not taken root in a community of disciples? What if those words had simply vanished into the night air? Or, what if they had been recorded...written down in a book...but a book that was merely housed in the dusty-shelves of aging libraries rather than in the active sanctuaries of living communities of faith? Would his words have shaped a culture? Would his words register beyond the curiosity of scholarly types, no doubt producing the occasional thesis or two in University departments dedicated to the study of dead-religions?

And maybe, just maybe, the word “institution” is an unrecoverable word. Maybe, just maybe, you and I—in a media saturated age—are just too savvy to be taken in by *any* institution whether it be institutionalized medicine, institutionalized education or, yes, institutionalized spirituality. Maybe we have no choice but to speak the “i” word in whispers, substituting the far better word “community”: the point being that religious communities (including the church) exist in order to conserve (not preserve the way we

preserve pickles) but to conserve a tradition: a tradition that can only be conserved if it is allowed to grow and live and breath within the growing and living and breathing confines of a community. A community...a faith-community...such as this one. And the bottom line is this:

A story such as the story of Jesus' healing of the bent woman will not make sense—cannot make sense—unless it is being lived out in the context of a community that is striving, against all kinds of obstacles from without and, sadly, all kinds of obstacles from within...a community that is nonetheless striving to bring that story to life. That's what churches are for! That's what *this* church is for! It's wonderful that we have this beautiful, comfortable facility for our own use and for the use of others. It's wonderful that we have been blessed, and continue to be blessed, by great music week-in and week-out. And yes: it's terrific that we occasionally get a sermon worth listening to; I'll let you be the judge of how often that happens!

But buildings and fine music and even the most inspired preaching mean absolutely nothing if they are not anchored within (and provide sustenance for) a community that desires to experience the Gospel and to help to bring the Gospel to life. A community that wants to offer hope and healing in the name of the One who came to bring good news to the poor, the One who was sent to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; the One who yearns to let the oppressed go free; the One who still proclaims the year of the Lord's favour. And yes:

The One who sees and who insists that we learn to see the downcast not as disposable, not as sinners doing time, not as unlucky victims of some coldly impersonal fate, but as sons and daughters of Abraham, beloved children created in God's own image, human persons God-in-Christ is determined not only to set free, but to restore to the God given dignity that no one and no-thing can ever be permitted to take from them.

Which means...which means...which means that you and I, when we say in response to those who are "spiritual but not religious" that we, for our part, are "Spiritual...and perhaps a wee bit religious..."...what that means is nothing more—but nothing less—than our acknowledgement of our willingness to be part of just such a community, to serve as agents of just such a Gospel, to live as friends of just such a Saviour!

Following in the footsteps of the One who came singing love. Knowing that he was even willing to die singing love! Never permitting ourselves to forget that "for the song to go on, we must make it our own: you and I be the singers!"

May it be so! In Jesus' name!! Amen!!!

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